St. Stephen's Anglican Church

CHAMBLY, QUEBEC

Nathalie Clerk

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Introduction

Erected in 1820, St. Stephen's Anglican Church served the garrison of Fort Chambly as well as the civilian population of the village of Chambly. In continuous use since then, and despite minor modifications, this church remains an outstanding example of early 19th-century Canadian ecclesiastical architecture.

Chambly

Located some twenty miles southeast of Montreal in the rural and picturesque Richelieu River Valley, present-day Chambly is a very peaceful town. However, it was founded for military and commercial purposes in the 17th century since the Richelieu River was a strategic route between the American territories and the St. Lawrence River Valley. The town continued in these roles until the end of the 19th century. Fort Chambly, built on a point of land at the foot of the rapids (a compulsory stopping point for all vessels), was strategically located to repel possible invaders and to monitor the comings and goings of traders.

Chambly has a rich architectural heritage that eloquently reflects its past. Walking along Richelieu Street, visitors cannot help but admire the beautiful, early 19th-century stone houses built in the then fashionable British classical style. Some of these houses were built or inhabited by prominent people. The house at 18 Richelieu was built by Charles-Michel d'Irumberry de Salaberry, the hero of the Battle of Châteauguay. Number 27 Richelieu may have once belonged to the wealthy merchant John Yule.

On Bourgogne Street, near the fort and the river, stands St. Stephen's Anglican Church, another building closely connected with the history of Chambly, and whose interesting architecture has been preserved through the years. Erected in 1820 to serve the garrison of the fort and the small Anglican community in Chambly, it served both groups until the troops

departed in 1869. It remains as an Anglican place of worship. In 1970, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada recognized the historical and architectural value of this church.

Construction

The cornerstone of St. Stephen's Church was laid on May 11, 1820, in the presence of the local leading citizens. This traditional ceremony marked the beginning of construction work and the culmination of efforts initiated one year earlier to provide the Anglican community of Chambly and of the fort with a church. The establishment on August 17, 1819, of a committee of influential members of the Anglican community concerned about the "general interests of Religion, Morality and Civilization" hastened the implementation of the project. Assistant Commissary General Augustus Kuper, the Reverend Brooke Bridges Stevens, who was chaplain of the garrison, Doctor William Pardey, John Yule, Esq., and Samuel Hatt, Esq., were all members of this committee. They were responsible for collecting the necessary funds, finding a suitable site, and selecting plans and a builder for the church.

One of the building committee's first tasks was to find a piece of land that could accommodate a church and cemetery, and eventually allow the construction of a schoolhouse (1826) and rectory (1845-46). A site measuring four French *arpents* across from the fort was selected, and was granted by the government. Several years later, a further one and a half acres, purchased from Church Warden John Taylor, were added to the property.

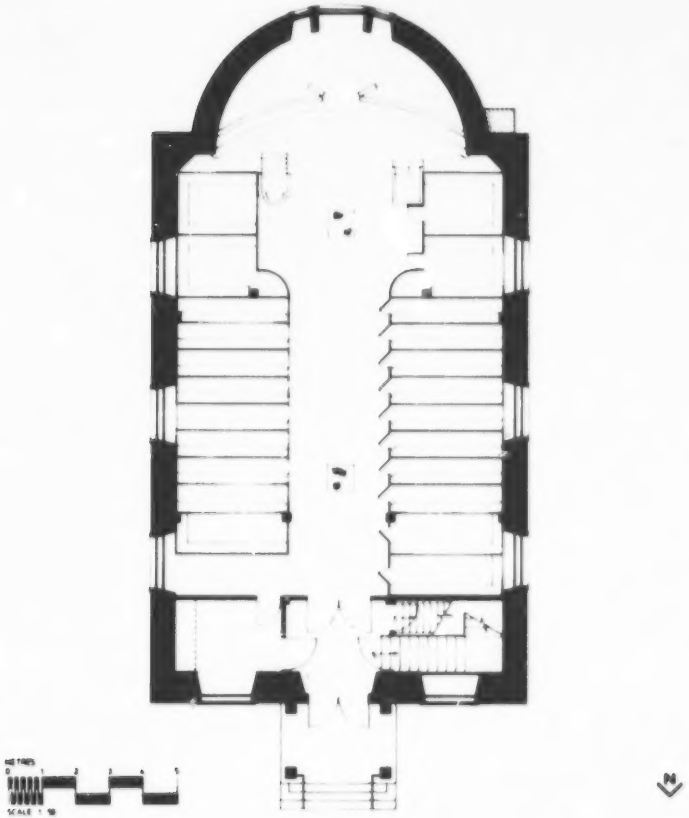
In late 1819, the committee called for tenders on two different types of churches: a wooden church measuring 60 feet by 40 feet, and a stone church measuring 50 feet by 32 feet. The contract for the stone church was finally awarded to François Valade, a carpenter and general contractor from the Montreal area. Tradition has it that the plans for the church were drawn up by the Reverend Parkin, who was Reverend Stevens's successor and the first missionary sent to Chambly by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

Chambly in 1838. The massive structure of the fort stands facing St. Stephen's Anglican Church (Watercolour by P.J. Bainbrigge, Public Archives of Canada, C-11856)

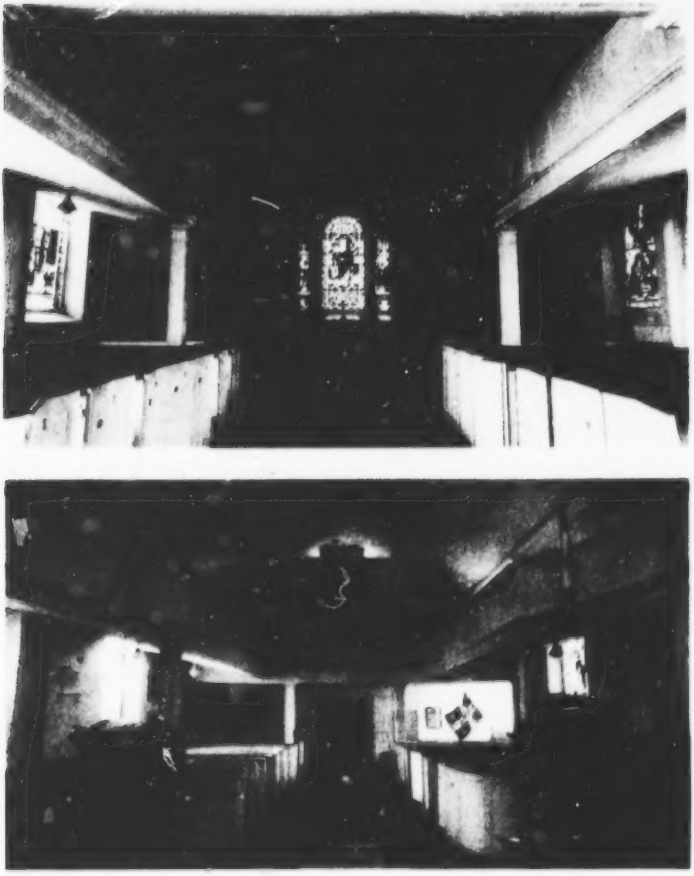
St. Stephen's Church looks much the same today as when it was built. This harmonious structure contrasts fieldstone walls with cut-stone corners and window frames. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)

The porch and the main entrance, with its semi-circular glass transom, reflect the Palladian influences. However modest they may be, the porch's Tuscan pillars add a monumental touch to the double door. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)

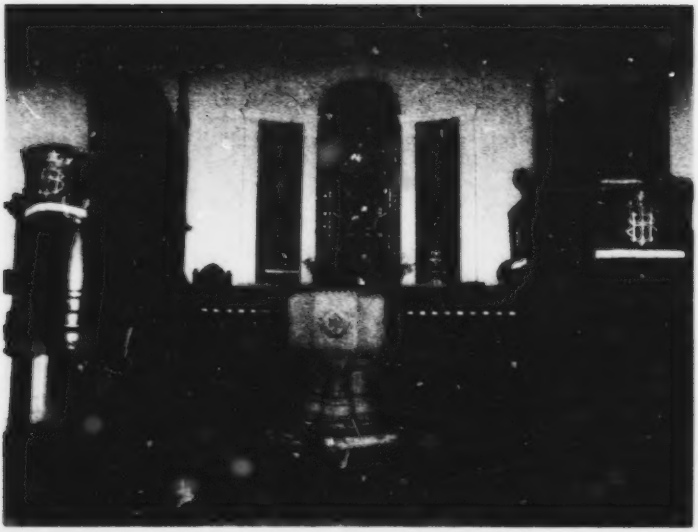
The Venetian window is a distinctive feature of Palladian architecture that was installed in many religious buildings. The decorative keystone treatment atop the semi-circular head of this window is repeated on all windows in the building. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)



St. Stephen's Church has a rectangular floor plan ending in a semi-circular recessed sanctuary. This type of plan reflects Quebec tradition, while the interior arrangement is typical of Anglican churches. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)



Channelled Tuscan pillars support the galleries. The angle of the walls and of the vaulted ceiling is emphasized by a moulded cornice. A delicate moulding decorates the panelling used in the pews, galeries, pulpit and lectern. The Tuscan-style woodwork of the organ case fits in perfectly with the general decor. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)



The most decorative feature of the sanctuary is the Venetian window. In contrast to its austere outside appearance, it is of considerable decorative value inside the church, displaying blind transoms above the side panels. The Tuscan pilaster window frames and their capitals and the moulded semi-circular arches and their keystones help to give the window a majestic and imposing appearance. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980).

Stained glass in the Venetian window. The central panel represents Jesus Christ; the side panels the Virgin Mary and Saint John. Below the figures are the coat of arms of the Yule and Howard families. The windows were donated by Mr. J.W. Howard in 1869, in memory of his wife, née Yule. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada Parks, 1980).

The Church

With its small size (approximately 50 feet by 30 feet by 25 feet) and its location set back from the street, St. Stephen's Church could easily go unnoticed. It is a small, rectangular structure with an apse that is narrower than the nave. The plain fieldstone walls have cut stone at the corners and around doors and windows. The building's face is both simple and graceful, with two semi-circular windows and one half-round window. The main entrance, surmounted by a semi-circular transom, is set off by a small porch done in the Tuscan order. (The plainest of the architectural orders, it is evident here in the very simple mouldings that decorate the bases and capitals of the pillars.) The steeple consists of superimposed octagonal sections (one open and the other in openwork). Each side wall has three semi-circular windows. There is a beautiful Venetian window (in three sections, the larger central section being topped by a semi-circular transom) in the apse.

The originality of St. Stephen's stems from its simple and harmonious combination of characteristics belonging to two Quebec architectural traditions. The material used to build the structure (coursed fieldstone), the proportions of the structure, and its small size are reminiscent of traditional Quebec churches and even certain memorial chapels. The past experience of the builder, François Valade, undoubtedly explains the presence of such features usually characteristic of the small Catholic churches of the day. Other aspects of St. Stephen's, however, reflect the influence of the Palladian style, which English immigrants introduced into the colonies and which, through their influence, would leave a mark on Quebec architecture.

As its name implies, the Palladian style is based on the principles and works of Andrea Palladio (1508-80), the famous Italian Renaissance architect. This style was introduced to the British colonies as early as 1750, although its main period of influence was from 1800 to 1820. This style favoured symmetry and order, and reflected the vocabulary of classical architecture. James Gibbs (1682-1754) was one of the British archi-

tects who applied its principles. Gibbs's churches rapidly gained the favour of the Anglican clergy and subsequently served as models for builders in England and the colonies.

At St. Stephen's, the organization and ornamentation of the façade, the Venetian window, the low roof without eaves, and the tiered steeple, not to mention the small porch, were not typical of traditional Quebec architecture, but were more commonly used in the large Anglican churches of the era in England as well as in the eastern United States and Canada. Such churches were usually just rectangular structures. St. Stephen's was built with a small apse — a component borrowed from the architectural vocabulary of Catholic churches. Moreover, the north-south orientation of the building is worth noting, since churches are usually built with an east-west orientation.

The interior of the church is as simple and unassuming as its exterior. The walls, ceiling and pews are all white. The only exceptions are the magnificent stained-glass windows added over the years. The interior layout is typical of Anglican churches. The nave comprises two rows of boxed pews dating back to the construction of the church. The lectern and pulpit are at the front, as is a railing that separates the nave from the sanctuary where the altar occupies a central position, beneath the Venetian window. The font's location at the head of the church is unusual. The loft houses a small swell-type choir organ with seven stops. Installed in 1854 to replace a small barrel organ, it was made by Samuel-Russell Warren, an American-born organ builder who settled in Montreal in 1836 and who built more than 400 instruments.

Unlike many buildings of this period, St. Stephen's Church has undergone few modifications that affected its original appearance. In 1833, for example, the pews were rearranged to accommodate a larger number of people; side galleries were added in 1839. The roof was redone in 1850, and a new bell was hung in the steeple in 1895. More recently, in 1948, the church was completely renovated.

Readings

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